THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

The Peak Country, 1520–1770

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CLASS AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Class, we are told, is dead. It has been excised from contemporary political discourse, and is being torn from its place at the heart of the social history of modern Britain. For many observers, rapid deindustrialization and the decline of mass society have removed the structural context within which class identities thrived. Shorn of Marxist certainties, social historians of modern Britain have come under the influence of new postmodern sociologies. Whereas Marxian social history had perceived of class as an embedded, material fact produced out of exploitation, immiseration and resistance, for their postmodernist successors class exists nowhere but in discourse. Earlier histories which saw working-class identity as a social fact born within the cradle of the early factory system and given voice in political radicalism and organized labour are now disparaged. Instead, class is seen as 'an imagined form, not something given in a "real" world beyond this form'.[1] To the postmodern historian, the force possessed by class in the nineteenth century came from its wide acceptance as a material fact, yet its only reality lay in discourse.[2] Hence the language of class is seen as having provided momentary expression to the social opposition imagined by socialists and radicals. That language enabled socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to construct universal claims to political and economic equality. Postmodernist historians of the industrial period now reveal that universalism to have been a mere discursive tissue which covered over differences of gender, ethnicity, locality and religion.[3] Having done battle with the ghost of Marxist historiography, the

[1] P. Joyce, *Democratic subjects: the self and the social in nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1994), 1.

[2] P. Joyce, 'The end of social history?', *Social History*, 20, 1 (1995), 82.

[3] P. Joyce, *Visions of the people: industrial England and the question of class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1991); J. Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993). On the unravelling of materialist definitions of class

postmodern historians of the industrial period now present us with the corpse of class analysis, revealing its 'spurious facticity' in the historical past at precisely the moment that its meaning is being denied in current political debate.[4]

There is some force to these claims. In its most developed and positive form, the postmodernist critique of class has allowed for a fuller appreciation of how difference operated within modern working-class culture, and has forced social historians to rethink key categories and assumptions. We shall see later how some postmodernist approaches might liberate social historians of early modern England from restrictive understandings of social relations and conflict. Yet we shall also see how the liberation of early modern social relations from the straitjacket of modernist historiography obliges its historians to reconfigure, rather than simply to eliminate, the role played by economics and exploitation in social conflict and popular politics. It is still too early to assess how enduring will be the impact of the new postmodernist sociologies within current political discourse. But it is certain that the collapse of Marxism has had far-reaching consequences for the theoretical foundations of modern social history.

The academic practice of social history was revolutionized in the West in the late 1960s. One of the few achievements of the middle-class student revolts of that era was the establishment of social history as a key contender in academic historical writing. Building upon the earlier work of the British Communist historians, a Marxian vision of social relations and structure came to predominate in studies of British industrial society after 1968. Heavily influenced by the culturalist Marxism of Edward Thompson, class formation became seen as a political process dragged out between the 1780s and 1832. None the less, even for Thompson, class was born within a structural context characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization and immiseration. English working-class culture and politics were therefore simultaneously a product of the political agency of working men and women, *and* of the Industrial Revolution. Although Thompson could find class struggles in England before the Industrial Revolution, these were insufficiently choate for the plebeian labouring poor to be called a working

experience and politics, see especially J.W. Scott, 'The evidence of experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97; P. Joyce (ed.), *Class: a reader* (Oxford, 1995), 3–16; G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of class: studies in English working class history, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), esp. 1–24, 90–178. For hostile comment, see for instance B.D. Palmer, *Descent into discourse: the reification of language and the writing of social history* (Philadelphia, 1990), ch. 4 ; N. Kirk, 'History, language, ideas and post-modernism: a materialist view', *Social History*, 19, 2 (1994), 221–40.

[4] Quoting Joyce, 'End of social history?', 85.

class.[5] Hence, for all the agency and contingency written into Thompson's vision of class formation, he remained wedded to a Marxist conception of social change as arising ultimately out of economics.[6] For Thompson, class remained a product of nineteenth-century industrial modernity. Historiographically, the paradigmatic foundations of modern social history remained dominated into the early 1980s by Marxian formulations of social change. Subsequent studies challenged details of this formulation, but in order to do so critics had to endure an early immersion in the language and assumptions of dialectical materialism.[7] Both the paradigmatic foundations and the dominant language of modern social history were therefore so intimately bound up with Marxism after the 1960s that the contemporary crisis in one has in some quarters been perceived as inducing a crisis in the other. It should not therefore come as any surprise that the end of social history has recently been announced.[8]

Every historian, of course, loves a good crisis, whether to be identified in the past or manufactured in the present. None the less, the current 'decline of class' perceived by modern social historians has been greeted with a degree of bewilderment amongst their neighbours in the early modern period, amongst whom the postmodernist critique of Marxism has thus far had less impact. The reasons for this are partly historical and partly historiographical. Historically, students of class have tended to have been pulled towards the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for it was in that period that class seemed to appear in its most commonsensical forms. The study of labour movements and class-based socialist parties, struggling in the shadows of the great ideologies of the post-Enlightenment age against a background of urbanization, industrialization and modernization, seemed to offer a more enticing prospect than anything on offer in earlier periods. Historiographically, Marxian formulations of social change had become critical to understanding the industrial period, even for those who wish to criticize Marxist assumptions.

[5] E.P. Thompson, 'Patrician society, plebeian culture', *Journal of Social History*, 7, 4 (1974), 382–405; *idem*, 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?', *Social History*, 3, 2 (1978), 133–65; *idem*, *Customs in common* (London, 1991), ch. 2.

[6] E.P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (1963; 2nd edn, London, 1968). For a summary of Thompson's interpretation of class formation, see W.H. Sewell, 'How classes are made: critical reflections on E.P. Thompson's theory of working-class formation', in H.J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds.), *E.P. Thompson: critical perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990), 50–77.

[7] This is most apparent in the twists and turns of Stedman Jones' work, from his *Outcast London: a study in the relationship between classes in Victorian society* (Oxford, 1971) to his *Languages of class*.

[8] Joyce, 'End of social history?'. In the same vein, see also J. Vernon, 'Who's afraid of the "linguistic turn"? The politics of social history and its discontents', *Social History*, 19, 1 (1994), 81–97.

In contrast, Marxism was almost absent from the 'new' social history of the early modern period which emerged after the late 1960s.[9] Whereas Marxism provided the questions (if not always the answers) that drove the engines of modern British social history in the 1970s, the 'new' social history of early modern England was developed at a conscious distance from the Marxist tradition. This was partly a by-product of an acrimonious debate then taking place on one of the contested borderlands of the 'new' social history. Within seventeenth-century political history, the 1970s and early 1980s saw a protracted exchange between Marxist historians of the English Revolution and their so-called 'revisionist' critics. Led by Christopher Hill, Marxist historians saw in the 1640s a revolutionary transformation which established the preconditions for the emergence of industrial capitalism in the following century.[10] In contrast, the 'revisionists' preferred to stress the short-term causes and consequences of the civil wars.[11] In an early reverse to the operation of the Marxist paradigm upon British historical writing, the 'revisionists' were seen by most observers by the mid-1980s to have had the best of the confrontation. Rather than enter into this debate, the 'new' social historians of early modern England chose to adopt a distanced neutrality.

The conscious removal of the 'new' social history from the debate over the English Revolution had three consequences for the subsequent development of the field. First, unlike modern social history the theoretical impulses of the 'new' social history thereafter came from sources other than Marxism. Structuralist anthropology allowed for an appreciation of culture and belief in the period, while an understated Weberianism provided a model of change in which England's 'early modernity' in the sixteenth and

[9] For the reflections of one of the best practitioners of that 'new' social history upon his subject, see K.E. Wrightson, 'The enclosure of English social history', in A. Wilson (ed.), *Rethinking social history: English society, 1570–1920 and its interpretation* (Manchester, 1993), 59–77.

[10] Emblematic titles included: C. Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1967); *idem*, *World turned upside down*; L. Stone, *The causes of the English Revolution, 1529–1642* (London, 1972); B. Manning, *The English people and the English Revolution* (1976; 2nd edn, London, 1991). For an acerbic review of the Marxist interpretation of the English Revolution, see A. MacLachlan, *The rise and fall of revolutionary England: an essay on the fabrication of seventeenth-century history* (Basingstoke, 1996).

[11] Outstanding were: C. Russell, *Parliaments and English politics, 1621–1629* (Oxford, 1979); *idem*, (ed.), *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (London, 1990); *idem*, *The causes of the English civil war* (Oxford, 1990); J.S. Morrill, *The revolt of the provinces: conservatives and radicals in the English civil war, 1630–1650* (London, 1976); *idem*, *The nature of the English Revolution* (London, 1993), esp, chs. 3, 8–10; M.A. Kishlansky, *The rise of the New Model Army* (Cambridge, 1979); *idem*, *Parliamentary selection: social and political choice in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1986). For a review of the Marxist-revisionist debate, see R.C. Richardson, *The debate on the English Revolution revisited* (1977; 2nd edn, London, 1988), chs. 7–11.

seventeenth centuries was assured as the 'new' social historians' special area of scrutiny.[12] Secondly, the absence of Marxism meant that the category of class was removed from the 'new' social history's agenda as a potential subject for enquiry. Thirdly, the 'new' social history was defined in opposition to political history. Whereas modern social historians overtly connected the history of social identities and cultural practice to political movements and debate, early modern social historians tended to avoid such subjects, and settled for a more descriptive, less analytic approach. Politics and class were not to be discussed at the dinner table of the 'new' social history.

None the less, the social historians of early modern England found much to occupy their time: there were histories of crime, kinship, social structure, urbanization, literacy, population change, household relations, sexual behaviour, riot, witchcraft and moral regulation (amongst other subjects) to be written. These histories produced unexpected revelations. It became clear that the early modern economy and social structures had gone through rapid, convulsive change. Those changes bred important local conflicts which, since so few strayed into the public world of state-centred elite politics, the 'new' social history could claim as its territory.[13] Occasions of organized disorder were regarded as especially important. It was shown that many disputes occurred between lord and tenant, or between different sections of the local population, over custom and common right. These sometimes exploded into riot. Alternatively, riots occurred as a result of high food prices. Moreover, the sixteenth century saw a number of important rebellions and near-rebellions, from which important conclusions concerning relations between ruler and ruled could be drawn. Fascinating though such occasions of disorder were, they none the less presented a conceptual problem: some historians felt that they could detect a spirit of 'class antagonism', even of 'class hatred' amongst rioters and rebels.[14] Others remained certain that the localism of such disturbances

[12] For the influence of structuralist anthropology, see especially K. Thomas, *Religion and the decline of magic: studies in popular beliefs in sixteenth and seventeenth century England* (London, 1971); for the liminal influence of Weber in historical understandings of social change in the period, see especially P. Laslett, *The world we have lost: further explored* (London, 1965; 3rd edn, 1983); K.E. Wrightson, *English society, 1580–1680* (London, 1982).

[13] B. Sharp, *In contempt of all authority: rural artisans and riot in the west of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley, 1980); J.D. Walter, 'A "rising of the people"? The Oxfordshire rising of 1596', *P&P*, 107 (1985), 90–143; *idem*, 'Grain riots and popular attitudes to the law: Maldon and the crisis of 1629', in J. Brewer and J. Styles (eds.), *An ungovernable people: the English and their law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (London, 1980), 47–84; J.D. Walter and K.E. Wrightson 'Dearth and the social order in early modern England', *P&P*, 71 (1976), 22–42.

[14] J.A. Sharpe, *Crime in early modern England, 1550–1750* (London, 1984), 135–6; Sharp,

meant that they were pre-class, even pre-politics.[15] The archival evidence therefore embedded a strange contradiction at the heart of the 'new' social history. On the one hand, rioters and rebels seemed sometimes to speak about early modern society in class terms. On the other, modern social historians were insistent that class society only arrived with industrial modernity and the fully formed nation-state.[16]

If the pattern of social relations in the period raised problems, so too did the emerging picture of English social structure.[17] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society was starting to appear as much more diverse, complex and dynamic than the 'traditional' societies imagined in classical sociology and structural anthropology, and with which it has sometimes been compared.[18] In many respects, the picture which the early modern social historians were drawing of their subject was coming to look rather more like a Weberian 'modern' society than its near-static 'traditional' precursor. And yet, it still *felt* so different from the industrial modernity of the mid-nineteenth century. For here, as every early modern social historian had been trained to recall, stood an obvious class structure and real, true class consciousness in all its fully formed, mid-nineteenth century, masculine, urban, conscious, organized forms. Most importantly, here was the *word* class, and here could be found its organized political expression.

Real class, it was decided, lay beyond early modernity. Historians came

In contempt, 7–8, 33; J. Samaha, 'Gleanings from local criminal-court records: sedition amongst the "inarticulate" in Elizabethan Essex', *Journal of Social History*, 8 (1975), 61–79.

[15] R.B. Manning, *Village revolts: social protest and popular disturbance in England, 1509–1640* (Oxford, 1988); K. Lindley, *Fenland riots and the English Revolution* (London, 1982).

[16] See for instance H. Perkin, *Origins of modern English society* (London, 1969); J. Foster, *Class struggle and the Industrial Revolution: early capitalism in three English towns* (London, 1974). For a dissenting view, see R.S. Neale, *Class in English history 1680–1850* (Oxford, 1981).

[17] For important case-studies, see K.E. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and piety in an English village: Terling, 1525–1700* (1979; 2nd edn, Oxford, 1995); M. Spufford, *Contrasting communities: English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1979). For migration, see P. Clark, 'Migration in England during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', in P. Clark and D. Souden (eds.), *Migration and society in early modern England* (London, 1987), 213–52. For urbanization, see P. Clark and P. Slack (eds.), *Crisis and order in English towns, 1500–1700: essays in urban history* (London, 1972). For population, see E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (1981; 2nd edn, Cambridge, 1989). For the implications of demographic change, see D. Levine, *Family formation in an age of nascent capitalism* (New York, 1977).

[18] For the comparison, see J.C. Davis, 'Radicalism in a traditional society: the evaluation of radical thought in the English commonwealth, 1649–60', *History of Political Thought*, 3, 2 (1982), 193–213. Peter Laslett, while producing some pioneering studies of the dynamics which underwrote early modern social structure, none the less persisted in regarding early modern society as 'traditional': *World we have lost*, esp. chs. 1–3, 8–9, 11.

to see that claim as so obvious and commonsensical as to require simple reassertion rather than demonstration. Thus, Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson found the case against the presence of class in early modern society so overwhelming that their bald statement that 'a class society had not in our period yet arrived' was thought sufficient discussion of the topic. The concept of class was regarded as alien to the period, and conceptual barriers erected against its infiltration: John Morrill found the 'importation of notions of class' to be 'highly dubious'. David Underdown advised 'great . . . caution' in the use of the term. For Perez Zagorin, 'early modern society was [simply] not a class society'.[19] Working from such assumptions, J.C.D. Clark could therefore discover a hierarchical, paternalist 'ancien regime' which endured until the end of the eighteenth century.[20] Despite all the advances in the social history of the period, and with certain notable exceptions, it therefore seems that H.N. Brailsford's comment of almost forty years ago that 'historians are as shy in confronting the fact of class as were novelists of the last century in facing the fact of sex' still holds true.[21]

Borrowing from Thompson, it was decided that class stirred into life from the late eighteenth century, to achieve its mature dominance in politics, material life and discourse by the middle of the nineteenth century. For all that social historians found that the peasants were revolting in early modern England, their plebeian culture could not be a class culture. And thus, in spite of the curious structural precocity of early modern society, it was in the very absence of class that early modernity found its peculiar and unique identity. In a highly influential formulation, Keith Wrightson summed up the matter:

> The broad structural characteristics of local society were common. It was not a society dominated by class affiliation; for however strong the awareness of status within a specific local context, broader class consciousness was inhibited for those below the level of the gentry by their lack of alternative conceptions of the social order; their envelopment in relationships of communality and deference, by the localism which gave those ties force and meaning, and by the lack of institutions which might organize and express a horizontal group consciousness of a broader kind. It was perhaps a society which possessed an incipient class dimension in its distribution of wealth, productive relations and market situation, and in which antagonisms between social strata undoubtedly existed. But these were too limited to a specific social situation and too temporary an element in cognitive experience

[19] Fletcher and Stevenson, 'Introduction', 4; see also p. 19 for a reiteration of the point; J.S. Morrill, *Seventeenth century Britain 1603–1714* (Folkestone, 1980), 108–9; Underdown, *Revel, riot and rebellion*, 168; P. Zagorin, *Rebels and rulers 1500–1660*, I: *Society, states and early modern revolution – agrarian and urban rebellions* (Cambridge, 1982), 61.

[20] J.C.D. Clark, *English society, 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1985).

[21] H.N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (London, 1961), 6.

to allow us to speak of class as a dominant principle in social relations. That was to come.[22]

In this important discussion, a series of claims are made. The language of both Marx and Weber are heard, but neither are fully articulated, nor admitted. A modernization paradigm is immediately apparent: early modern society was on its way to somewhere else. On that journey, 'an incipient class dimension' is to be observed, standing at the gateway to modernity. That incipient class dimension existed within what Marxists used to call the objective world of economics: not only is exploitation perceived to exist, but (crucially) it is seen to be organized through market mechanisms. None the less, within the subjective world of social relations and power politics, the early modern lower orders, enveloped 'in relationships of communality and deference' lacked 'alternative conceptions of the social order'. If not exclusive, these were at least hegemonic; their 'localism' dovetailed with a lack of class-based 'institutions'. Antagonisms between social groups existed, but were temporary and local. From this series of negativities which illuminate what early modern society was *not*, we can discern the positive definition of class which motivates Wrightson's account. A real class, a class-for-itself, is seen as possessing permanent and nationally organized political institutions which articulate its own vision of how society should be organized, and as striving towards such a condition. Class is presented as dependent upon objective, material circumstances. These form the combustible material which is ignited by experience and agency into national political struggle. It is inferred that in the modern, industrial society of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, a working class could be positively identified in all these respects. It is explicitly stated that in 'pre-industrial', early modern England a working class could not be so identified. The periodization depends upon Weber; the internal theorization of nineteenth-century class formation upon the culturalist Marxism of Edward Thompson.

All of this made sense within a social history paradigm which saw the end-point of early modernity at the close of the eighteenth century, where class was being formed. It makes rather less sense if that end-point were to be removed. That removal is currently being effected. Yet we need not assume that the destruction of the modernization model renders the concept of class useless. Ironically, the postmodernists' claim that social identities in modern Britain were more contingent and less homogeneous

[22] Wrightson, *English society*, 65. For a very similar formulation, see Underdown, *Revel, riot and rebellion*, 115. See also Wrightson's highly suggestive but ultimately frustrating 'The social order of early modern England', in L. Bonfield, R.M. Smith, K.E. Wrightson (eds.), *The world we have gained: histories of population and social structure* (Oxford, 1986),177–202.

than had first been thought, and that they were primarily constructed through discourse rather than produced out of economics, can prove positively useful in the re-evaluation of early modern social relations.[23] Rather than seeing in the early modern period a protracted transition from one condition of social relations to another, we are freed to assess the historical content of those relations on their own terms. Instead of measuring early modern social formations and identities against a reified category of class deriving from nineteenth-century experience, we can develop more flexible, sensitive and historicized understandings of class identity and conflict.[24] In the next section, I will sketch some of what I see as the salient features of class identity, illuminated by examples taken from the early modern Peak Country. The list is not exhaustive or proscriptive. Theorists and purists may be offended by the strange assemblage of authorities who stand behind some of my claims.[25] I can only say in my defence that I have tried to suggest a series of categories by which social relations and conflict might be understood historically. This is not an attempt to construct yet another universal model. We will begin with the most materialist of statements about class conflict, class formation and class identity.

RETHINKING CLASS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Class exists as a structural, economic fact, embedded in material life. Perceptions of social inequality, immiseration and exploitation are struc-

[23] I imagine that the leading proponent of postmodernist practice within nineteenth-century social history would not find himself in sympathy with this. After performing ritual postures concerning the 'untenable' nature of 'linear notions of class development', Patrick Joyce announces that 'there is no denying that class was a child of the nineteenth century': *Visions of the people*, 3, 1.

[24] The point has been made elsewhere. See for instance Thompson, 'Eighteenth century English society', 149–50, 151; W.M. Reddy, 'The concept of class', in M.L. Bush (ed.), *Social orders and social classes in Europe since 1500: studies in social stratification* (London, 1992), 23; and most recently G. Rosser, 'Crafts, guilds and the negotiation of work in the medieval town', *P&P*, 154 (1997), 9.

[25] Recent debates over the nature of class identity and the future of the 'social history' project have been very polarized. Protagonists have tended to work from stereotypes of one another's positions, while ignoring those areas of practical and conceptual overlap which might exist between materialist and post-structuralist approaches. I am thinking here of the recent debate over the legacy of E.P. Thompson and the purported 'death' of social history in the pages of *Social History* in the years 1992 to 1996. For what it matters, I tend to feel that much of the work of the early Marx does not lie a million miles away from the post-structuralist emphasis upon language, agency and ideology. For more on this, see especially P. Curry, 'Towards a post-Marxist social history: Thompson, Clark and beyond', in Wilson (ed.), *Rethinking social history*, 158–200; M.W. Steinberg, 'Culturally speaking: finding a commons between post-structuralism and the Thompsonian perspective', *Social History*, 21, 2 (1996), 193–214.

tured by and expressed through discourse, but remain built upon (if not always reducible to) a material reality. Dominant forms of production and exploitation inherently produce discontents and conflicts, and differences in the social distribution of wealth and power form the bedrock of all class societies. It therefore matters intensely to the history of social relations in the mid-seventeenth-century Peak Country that in 1658 the Earl of Rutland could spend £1,146 on 'Jewells' and some £4,000 on the wedding of his son, Lord Roos, while that same year a landless skilled miner working for wages in the Earl's mines could expect a yearly cash income of perhaps £18.[26] We are dealing here with extremes, of course. In other parts of England in 1658, it may well be that a largish, relatively affluent middling group existed between these two polarities.[27] But not in the Peak, which throughout the course of our period remained one of the poorest regions in England. Indeed, as we shall see in Part I, our hypothetical skilled miner stood near to the broad apex of village society in the mid-seventeenth-century Peak. As a means of demarcating blunt, harsh, cruel social facts, class therefore lives and breathes beyond discourse, just as differences in the distribution of wealth and power bleed into the discursive fabric of class identities.

Economic power could be very visibly centred. And in the early modern period, just as today, economic power meant political power. The location of that power in the manor house or the mine-owner's account book remains brutally obvious, and can be historically retrieved. But power was not the unmediated product of economics. Rather, the maintenance of social inequalities and exploitation depended upon politics. The power of dominant social groups could be accepted by their subordinates. It could also be negotiated, undermined, ignored, contradicted and overtly contested. Social conflict in the Peak possessed an inherent politics (the nature of which is explicitly discussed in Chapter 11) which took a public, collective form. In contesting the authority of lords, gentlemen, priests and employers, the miners and peasants of the Peak de-centred power from its traditional locations. Thereby, they helped to construct and renew a new set of exclusions and oppressions, in which women and unskilled men were locked out from political participation. Women's attempts to contest that exclusion complete the conceptual loop within local plebeian political culture.

Class is therefore about power in at least two important respects: as a means of defining the practice of social relations in the interest of ruling

[26] NAO, DJFM/83/1; miners' earnings calculated from PRO, RGO 33 and PRO, DL41/17/19.

[27] See most recently J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds.), *The middling sort of people: culture, society and politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994).

groups; and as a source of conflict over that practice. Both matters bear heavily upon the issue of social deference. Insofar as any debate exists over the nature of early modern social relations, it usually takes the form of a dispute over the extent to which social relations were conducted according to rules of deference and reciprocity, or to notions of class conflict.[28] Yet strong senses of class solidarity and dominant languages of social deference have been seen to co-exist in other historical contexts.[29] Rather than seeing class and deference as mutually exclusive, plebeian spirits of class antagonism and public faces of lower-class deference should be seen as two sides of the same coin.[30] Class societies consistently breed situations in which members of subordinated social groups are rendered visibly powerless. Those situations are themselves produced out of preceding periods of conflict, and can be intended to restate the threatened authority of a ruling group. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the matter of punishment. In the 1630s, the powerful gentleman Sir William Armyn prevented the inhabitants of Wirksworth from exercising their customary right to take timber from Cromford wood. Two 'poor men' whom Armyn caught 'stealing' timber there were flogged through the streets of their home town. When George Vallence and his brother John were also caught in Cromford wood in 1636, they therefore made public submission to Armyn, coming to the gentleman 'to humble themselves for such their trespass & to make their composicion wth him that they might not be sued for their offence soe made'. The event was still remembered with bitterness by the women and men of Wirksworth in the 1660s.[31] The mask of deference which the Vallence brothers wore stated their lack of power in the situation in which they found themselves. That lack of power took

[28] See for instance J.A. Sharpe, *Early modern England: a social history, 1550–1760* (London, 1987), 120–3, 223–4; Underdown, *Revel, riot and rebellion*, 168–74. On the foundations of the 'deference' model in functionalist sociology, see A. Arriaza, 'Mounsier and Barber: the theoretical underpinning of the "society of orders" in early modern Europe', *P&P*, 89 (1980), 39–57.

[29] Deference has seen as a by-product of the harsh class relations of post-Chartist south-east Lancashire: see P. Joyce, *Work, society and politics: the culture of the factory in later Victorian England* (London, 1980).

[30] I try to deal with the matter more fully in A. Wood, '"Poore men woll speke one daye": plebeian languages of deference and defiance in England, *c.* 1520–1640', in T. Harris (ed.), *The politics of the excluded in early modern England* (Basingstoke, forthcoming). For an important historical study of the subtleties of deference, see K.D.M. Snell, 'Deferential bitterness: the social outlook of the rural proletariat in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in Bush (ed.) *Social orders and social classes*, 158–84. For an anthropological perspective, see J.C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts* (Yale, 1990). For the classic sociological statement, see H. Newby, *The deferential worker: a study of farm workers in East Anglia* (London, 1977).

[31] PRO, DL4/109/8.

the form of a ritual act of submission, but was produced out of social conflict.

The language of deference held a real force within early modern society. Founded upon the unequal distribution of power, it required constant maintenance through displays of coercion and contempt on the part of elites. But it also fed into ritualized exchanges between social groups which might mask a real friendship. By the late seventeenth century, for instance, a dole of ale was traditionally given by mine overseers to their workforce upon striking through into new veins. Such relations cut both ways: in the late sixteenth century, free miners in Wirksworth chose not to exercise their controversial right of free mining in one local gentleman's fields because he was 'a very good housekeep[er] & generally beloved of all the miners'.[32] But the language of deference could cover over a more complex and political interplay of social relationships. In 1659, the miners of Youlgreave thanked the Earl of Devonshire for the 'clemency' he displayed in not prosecuting them for their trespass on to Meadowplecke Grange, on which they and their ancestors had long claimed a customary right of free mining. In the same document, the Earl granted the miners the rights over the Grange which they had long sought. Represented as a grant from a gracious lord to a recalcitrant plebeian group, in fact an agreement had been reached over Meadowplecke Grange in which Devonshire came out the loser. Shortly before 1659, the Earl of Rutland had defeated the last of a protracted series of attempts by the Youlgreave miners to claim a right of free mining on his nearby Haddon estate. In granting the Youlgreave miners free mining rights in Meadowplecke Grange, Devonshire avoided the disruption and expenses to which Rutland had been put. The document in which the new customs were agreed was worded so as to save the Earl's face.[33] Displays of deference and hierarchy were always, therefore, extremely political.

When representing their grievances or answering complaints before courts, plebeians spoke of themselves in a submissive language which was belied by their actions. In the *c.* 1590–1640 period, the Peak miners fought protracted disputes with their superiors over their claimed right of free mining, resulting in a series of legal actions, riots and organized invasions of gentry estates. Yet in representing their grievances to the Westminster courts which adjudicated in those disputes, the miners described themselves as submissive and powerless, arguing that since they were 'poore men', they should be 'suffered and supported to digge and searche for lead'.[34]

[32] PRO, RGO 33; PRO, DL4/72/31.
[33] BL, Add. MSS 6678, fols. 1–13. For the Haddon disputes, see Chapters 10 and 12 below.
[34] S.R. Gardiner (ed.), *Reports of cases in the Star Chamber and High Commission*, Camden Society, new ser., 39 (1886), 106; PRO, DL4/72/31.

Claims to poverty and powerlessness were seen to guarantee rights.[35] Appeals to elite authorities could flatter, cajole or threaten. Around 1650, the inhabitants of Litton made petition to the Earl of Rutland, requesting his intervention in their dispute with their lord, who sought to enclose their commons. The petitioners asked for 'pittie' and 'compassion' from the Earl, and then went on:

> Farre bee it from us to censure, who rather desire to pray for your Honour: yet as we cannot be insensible of that imm[in]ent danger which threatens us & our posteritie, so are wee very sensible of the mouths which will bee opened against & that vaile of disgrace which would be drawen over that Ancient and Hoble. house of Hadden if this should be written of her & recorded to future generations that she deserted tenants & sold them over into the hands of a merciless man.[36]

The petitioners were moved more by tactics than deference. Many of the named petitioners had themselves run into trouble with the House of Haddon. Although their plea to the Earl was couched in the classical language of deference, its sting is still apparent: for England's gentry and nobility were taught to place great weight upon reciprocity and reputation. The Litton inhabitants were here attempting to exploit that system of thought, arguing that if the Earl should be seen to desert his tenants, then the credit of the House of Haddon could only suffer.

The dominant discourse which assumed a reciprocal exchange of patronage and deference could therefore be contested, exploited and undermined. In so doing, lower-class individuals and groups could unbalance local systems of power, if only for a moment. The long-running disputes over customary law which gave the politics of social conflict its peculiar flavour within the Peak Country provided the experiential basis upon which plebeians could reimagine the local social order in highly conflictual and polarized terms. In describing social conflict, plebeians sometimes fell reflexively into a language of class. The idiomatic quality of that language persisted through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and defined an opposition of material interest between 'Rich and Powerful men' and 'Poor men' over the matter of custom in particular.[37] In that encounter, 'Rich men' held a series of structural advantages. Most obviously, miners and cottagers could be physically coerced by mounted and armed gentlemen and their retainers using 'Terrer & Feare' and 'grette force & stronge hand'. Plebeians conceived of the 'power and commaunde' of 'Rich

[35] For other examples, see *APC, 1615–16*, 224; HLRO, MP 9 April 1624; PRO, C2/JasI/G2/48; PRO, DL1/352, answer of Anthony Harding *et al.*; LPL, Shrewsbury MS 705, fol. 110.

[36] SA, Bag C 2094.

[37] Quotations are from: PRO, DL4/43/24, /27/26, /53/59, /72/31, /144/1746/1; PRO, C21/F11/10, /C11/10, /D1/13; PRO, REQ2/3/301; PRO, E178/611. Examples are dated anywhere between 1518 and 1746.

men' as socially produced. The bonds of blood, marriage and interest which linked gentry and noble families together were known to early modern plebeians long before historians identified the existence of gentry 'county communities'. Peak miners and peasants knew that 'rich men' held 'greate power & commaunde' as part of a network with other 'rich men'. Thus 'men of great power & substance' could threaten 'pore men' 'wth [their] own greatnes and the greatnes of [their] freinds', and 'Powerful men . . . [held] great Comande . . . by themselves their kindred and alleyances.' The exercise of that social and political power was built upon and driven by economics: 'Great rich men . . . keepe great score of sheepe'. 'Men of welthe & estate' denied poor men their right through the overstocking of the commons, and thereby increased their own profits. Most importantly, 'powerful men . . . by violence [have] holden the myners down by their own combynacion', to deny the right of free mining in their own interest. All of this bred a close awareness of the basic inequalities of wealth and power which ran through class society. 'Great men could do great things', but 'poor men' could not.

Yet this did not mean that 'poor men' had no voice in the contest. It was known that the legal system could be biased in favour of the rich. In the early seventeenth century, tithe proprietors threatened the miners with their 'Orders and Decrees' and 'threats, imprisonments [and] punishments'. John Gell in particular was known as a 'powerfull man' who did not hesitate to 'undoe' those miners who opposed him. Similarly, the mid-seventeenth century miners' 'rich and powerful . . . oppressor' the Earl of Rutland was able to manipulate the legal system through 'niceities at law', and enjoyed privileged access to the 'power of the lord's house'.[38] But in order to secure its authority, the law had to give 'poor men' a voice. Collective litigation before central law courts engendered organizational skills and legal knowledge in local cultures, and built within them a tradition of resistance. That tradition became most visible in the instances of riot and demonstration which went together with popular collective litigation in the Peak Country during the *c.* 1590–1660 period. The miners of the Peak were at the forefront of this movement.

Classes are identified in relationship to other classes through systems of difference. Class identities are thereby built into the proscription of gender difference.[39] In identifying 'rich men' as the opponents of free mining

[38] PRO, E112/75/165, /294/31; N. Kirkham, 'Lead miners and royalists', *Derbyshire Miscellany*, 2, 5 (1961), 294; *The case of a publique business*, (1649?) DCL; BL, Add. MS 6677, fol. 49.

[39] G.M. Sider, *Culture and class in anthropology and history: a Newfoundland illustration* (Cambridge, 1986), 5–9; Thompson, *Making*, 12; J.W. Scott, 'On language, gender and working-class history', in her *Gender and the politics of history* (New York, 1988), 62, 66.

custom, Peak miners drew an upper limit to their social identity. By *c.* 1600, to be a Peak miner was to be a member of a community of skilled, knowledgeable, adult, plebeian men who respected custom and tradition, and who were prepared to fight (legally, politically and perhaps physically) in defence of their rights. Built into that identity were a series of inclusions, enabling 'poor men' to claim 'rights' which stood in opposition to the interests of 'rich men'. And at the hard edges of that identity lay a series of exclusions. In this instance as in so many others, conscious class identity therefore appears as relational, differential, and profoundly normative. It was also historically specific. The elucidation of the historical process whereby that construction was established is the central concern of Part II of this book, but should be noted here.

In 1581, the customs by which the lead industry had been governed were in a state of flux, imperilling the hitherto dominant position of the free miners. On some manors, lords were preventing the miners from digging in their estates, and were employing waged labourers to dig the deposits in their place. Elsewhere, thousands of poor, semi-vagrant 'cavers' were undercutting the free miners by flooding local markets with the scraps of lead ore they had taken from ancient rubbish tips. Yet within a generation, the miners had regained control, and had established themselves as a key interest group in local politics. Their new collective agency was bound up with the simultaneous redefinition of their identity, as miners came to see themselves as markedly different both from lords and from women and the unskilled. The coincidence of the specification of class and gender difference was not accidental. In 1581, some High Peak miners provided the fullest and one of the earliest statements of those interconnected exclusions.[40] They condemned the 'comon disorder' which resulted from the employment of 'men women and children that have little skill' in the mines by 'riche men', and presented in this the failure of the barmaster to uphold the customs of the industry. Defining themselves as the 'auncient and skilful miners', they presented themselves as the protectors of the 'auncient orders' of their industry and their communities against the combined threat of 'riche men' and 'unskilfull folke'. Both custom and skill were thereby taken as a male possession, at the same time as a social opposition was imagined between 'riche men' and 'skilful miners'. When male plebeians spoke of social conflict, they did so in highly gendered terms: 'rich men' opposed 'poor men'. The claim was fictional, but universal. In reality, many of the noble and gentry opponents of the plebeian interest were women. The names of Bess of Hardwick, Christiana the dowager Countess of Devonshire, Lady Grace Manners, Mrs Jennet Carrier and Lady Isabel Bowes will

[40] PRO, E178/611, more fully discussed in Chapter 7 below.

feature prominently in our discussion of the twists and turns of the politics of social conflict. Similarly, plebeian women had a real interest in the exercise of common rights and the maintenance of key aspects of customary law. As we shall see in Chapter 11, the public plebeian political culture of the early modern Peak Country allowed relatively little formal space to women. Part II of this book is partly concerned with how that exclusion was attempted, and with the nature of plebeian women's contestation of authority.

Class identities therefore emerge as contingent, unstable, relational and dynamic. Like gender, class is of necessity always being defined.[41] The comparison is more than rhetorical: for early modern conceptions of social order and disorder were highly gendered. Albeit in different contexts, the gendered sectionalism of the male working-class politics of the 1780–1832 period was shared by its predecessors. Following recent studies of that later period, class and gender will here be seen as intimately connected.[42] This study will reach forwards in time to connect with the rich social history of the early Industrial Revolution. Certain key similarities will be observed. But in Chapter 14 a key discontinuity will be noted, as the plebeian political tradition *of* the Peak Country is seen to twist into a working-class political tradition *in* the Peak Country. We will observe a different kind of class formation in which the fabric of early modern solidarities was partially unravelled and reworked. Yet we should not suppose that the regional specification of plebeian culture prior to 1780 ensures the absence of class identity. Studies of class formation have long been hampered by modern social historians' strange obsession with the nation-state. Ever since late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European socialists linked their political project to the transformed national identities of that period, social historians have been mesmerized by that single definition of class identity.[43] The assumption that 'true' class consciousness can only be manifest on the level of the nation-state has led historians to find in the closely felt local and regional plebeian identities of the early modern period one of the main barriers to the

[41] Here paraphrasing L. Gowing, *Domestic dangers: women, words and sex in early modern London* (Oxford, 1996), 28.

[42] Most especially L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class 1780–1850* (London, 1987), and A. Clark, *The struggle for the breeches: gender and the making of the British working class* (London, 1995). It is unfortunate that early modern social historians have often tended to consider gender identities as a discrete field of inquiry, without relationship to social identities. For an attempt at unravelling the complexities of that relationship, see S.D. Amussen, *An ordered society: gender and class in early modern England* (Oxford, 1988).

[43] The subject perhaps needs its own historian, but see the very suggestive remarks in D. Sassoon, *One hundred years of socialism: the West European Left in the twentieth century* (London, 1996), 5–8.

operation of class.[44] The reductive connection between nation and class reaches its logical dead end in the argument that the gentry and nobility comprised the only 'real' class in early modern England, since they were the only social collectivity that was organized on a national level.[45] Yet the history of modern European working-class political culture has often been the history of regions and localities. Whether historians are describing the insurrectionists of the Paris Commune, the mining communities of the Rhondda valley or the Anarchists of Catalonia, class and local identity have in many contexts been historically inseparable.

Class identities are therefore inscribed in space, and frequently depend upon strong local and regional cultures.[46] Peculiarities of local social structure can help to maintain the junction of social identity in particular places. Hence, the domination of a particular industry within a discrete territory can ground social identities within a specific site; similarly, the sudden collapse of that industry can break the collectivities and fracture the communities inhabited by class solidarities. Culturally, senses of local history can be written into the material environment, encoding memories of past struggles or lost liberties. Rather than requiring a national focus, the imagination of class identity can proceed from a reading of local history. The control of local histories by a subordinate social group can therefore become an empowering force, legitimizing the public political practice of a class as the defence of a community or a tradition.[47] In all these respects, local histories can become rather less antiquarian and rather more political. One way of approaching the historical study of social identities is therefore through an appreciation of local culture. In the early modern period, this should be especially appropriate, for it was within the locality or the small region such as the Peak Country that plebeian social identities were imagined.

LOCAL CULTURES AND POPULAR CULTURES

All social history should try to be comparative, moved by a sensitivity to difference and similarity across space and time.[48] Yet at the same time, social history must describe and analyse historical situations within contexts which were meaningful to their subject. These impulses conflict with

[44] Hence Underdown draws a distinction between 'localism' and 'class antagonism': *Revel, riot and rebellion*, 110.
[45] Laslett, *World we have lost*, ch. 2. But see also C. Hill, 'A one-class society?', in his *Change and continuity*, 205–18.
[46] M. Savage, 'Space, networks and class formation', in N. Kirk (ed.), *Social class and Marxism: defences and challenges* (Aldershot, 1996), 58–86.
[47] See J. Fentress and C. Whickham, *Social memory* (Oxford, 1992), 114–26.
[48] P. Abrams, *Historical sociology* (Shepton Mallet, 1982).

one another, generating a creative tension which has helped to drive this book. We will see that the story told here has a broad historical relevance. Early modern historians will find that the description of economic processes and social structures within the Peak Country adds to the limited literature concerning the history of English industrial regions.[49] The discussion of popular politics connects to current debates over the nature of early modern social relations and conflict, and to popular allegiances during the English Revolution. The account of custom, community and popular culture is addressed to the larger social history of the period. At the same time, historians of different periods should discern other strains in our story. The history of the Peak Country between 1520 and 1770 bears upon historical understandings of economics and social structure, industrialization and early capitalism, gender and class identities, literacy and popular culture, magic and official belief, state formation, law and custom, subordination, contestation and rebellion.

But this book is not simply a case-study of bigger issues. For us, 'the local' is a 'substantive' rather than a 'methodological' focus.[50] We approach the Peak Country as a place possessed of a historically important meaning in its own right. Its topography and mineral resources gave the region a distinct physical appearance, and helped to generate social structures and local identities within which the construction of cultural difference was articulated. Most importantly, that regional identity had a special force within early modern popular culture. Rather than seeing the Peak as the unproblematic backdrop to the history of larger processes, we will see it as central to popular culture. To that end, 'local culture' will be seen as interchangeable with 'popular culture'.[51] This, of course, represents a large simplification. Boundaries between 'elite/gentry' and 'plebeian/popular' culture were not fixed. Members of the gentry could partake of aspects of local culture at times – on Wakes days, or on perambulations of the bounds, for instance. Neither was popular culture homogeneous. Differences of religion, literacy, gender, place, social status and age ran through early modern English popular culture, whether studied from the

[49] For which, see especially Levine and Wrightson, *Making of an industrial society*; M. Zell, *Industry in the countryside: Wealden society in the sixteenth century* (Cambridge, 1994); V.H.T. Skipp, *Crisis and development: an ecological case study of the Forest of Arden, 1570–1674* (Cambridge, 1978); D. Hey, *The fiery blades of Hallamshire: Sheffield and its neighbourhood, 1660–1740* (Leicester, 1991).

[50] Savage, 'Space', 71.

[51] D.E. Underdown, 'Regional cultures? Local variations in popular culture during the early modern period', in T. Harris (ed.), *Popular culture in England, 1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 1995), 28–47. For an evocative reconstruction of popular culture in one region, see Rollison, *Local origins*.

macro- or micro-perspective.[52] Yet members of the gentry were at best only occasional participants in local culture: they could chose to partake of or to withdraw from the rough-and-tumble of village life. Plebeian men and women, old and young, or richer and poorer inhabitants might frequently perceive of one another as culturally distinct. Yet all made claims within the language of local, popular culture, and most of all upon the legitimizing grounds of custom and neighbourliness. Village disputes, while calling the historians' attention to discontents and divisions within local culture, at the same time reaffirmed its existence.

We begin, then, with the Peak Country. Bounded on the east, west and north by dark gritstone moors, the lead mining area of the early modern Peak sat in a wide limestone plateau, watered by the rivers Derwent and Wye and their tributaries (see Map 1). It is with the affairs of the human population of that limestone plateau that we are here concerned. The scattered inhabitants of the area which is today known as the Dark Peak – that is, those large tracts of gritstone moor which lay to the north of the lead field – must find their own historian. Devoid of lead deposits, and possessed of scant cultivable land, the history of the Dark Peak's inhabitants was quite different from that of their neighbours in the hills and valleys of the lead mining area. Like David Underdown's study of the West Country, we will develop an intimate knowledge of the geology and geography of the Peak Country. We will observe the importance of landscape and material environment in conditioning local conflicts, cultures and social structures within the Peak.[53] Yet structural and cultural differences were not the simple, unmediated product of ecology and economy. The peculiarities of administrative boundaries within the Peak were at least as important to the construction of local difference as was the material environment. From time to time, this study will therefore dwell in perverse detail upon the significance of changes in the legal, cultural and political meanings given to administrative boundaries. Those meanings were far from unproblematic, for they gave a concrete definition to abstract demands to rights or authority. In establishing that a particular custom operated within a specific place, or that a certain form of lordship pertained somewhere, local meanings were subject to change. We have seen in the preceding section how social identities depended upon the creation and maintenance of cultural boundaries. Those boundaries were often conceived in spatial terms, and drawn upon the material environment. Hence the village, the manor or the 'Country' could be reimagined as the

[52] See most recently T. Harris, 'Problematising popular culture', in Harris (ed.), *Popular culture*, 1–27.
[53] Underdown, *Revel, riot and rebellion*, *passim*.